

## Interdisciplinary Aspects of Public Art

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### Objectives

This paper analyzes the emergence of interdisciplinary discourse in the field of contemporary public art. The nature of interdisciplinary public art is investigated by considering two cases: the work of the German artist Tobias Rehberger, and a public art project in the small city of Zingonia, around Bergamo, Italy. These experiences are relevant for a consideration of recent public art because they highlight the present rethinking of the role of the artist, and the recent trend toward crossing disciplinary borders. We consider the rise of an interdisciplinary discourse as a new possibility born from a long debate inside the art practices.

In the introduction, we place the interdisciplinary public art trend within the context of the tremendous rethinking of the status of art that took place in the '60 and '70s. Specifically, we see the site-specific debate as the fundamental step toward the present. This debate focused the role of the context in art pieces, not just as exhibition, but also as outdoor. The second part analyzes more closely the two chosen cases to make some distinction in the interdisciplinary argument. The third conclusive part analyzes the peculiarity of the contemporary interdisciplinary art practices.

I

### Introduction.

The '60 and '70s: site specific art.

The end of the modernist paradigm in sculpture is taken here as a starting point. The dramatic reversal of art's nature that took place in the 60's and 70's introduced the vanishing point in the logic of aesthetic that informs the whole spectrum of contemporary practices in which virtually anything – any thing, gesture, event, or action – can be considered to be an art object. A general rethinking of the status of art involved the correlation between the art piece and the circumstance of place and context of location, and, consequently, the physical borders and body of the artwork. For instance, conceptual art considered a written text as art, just as a painting or a sculpture had been. The idea of text as art refers also to the place of circulation and distribution, and the context and conditions in which it is perceived. Joseph Kosuth's billboards "Art as Idea" placed in the remote desert of Nevada, or posted in different locations in Turin, used location and context as an instrument of investigation, and text as vehicle for distributing the meaning.

As Rosalyn Deutsche wrote: "site specific works demonstrated that the art object does not have an autonomous meaning that remains intact in changing spatial or temporal circumstances. The meaning of the art is formed in relation to its framing conditions and, as a consequence, alters with the space it occupies and the position of viewing subjects"<sup>1</sup>. Site-specific art works involve a rethinking of the space of art. Displacing the tangible materials of a specific site now relocates the lost connections between place and artwork, introduced by the modernist paradigm. Rather than being neutral, the site-specific strategy assimilated into the art piece components of a real place. "Spiral Jetty" of Robert Smithson is not nomadic or transportable.

In the Vito Acconci's performance "Following Piece", the artist followed a person randomly chosen in the street, and finished when the chosen person entered in a private place, home or office. It's an idea that goes far from the fixed object of art installed in a given space, by introducing art into the impurity of everyday life and his places, where the private habits and public space become permeable.

II.

II a. Confusing the question of art: art and design Tobias Rehberger.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Eviction: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1996. Cit. Pg. 237

The German artist Tobias Rehberger simultaneously uses design as an artistic product and art as design product. As he says, "I'm not interested in design so much as in its strategy. I am more interested in using it for an artistic product that I am in as such. Is that something that can be discussed in the arts?"<sup>2</sup>. Rehberger used design, fashion, and architecture as a catalyst of people's desires. As he says, "using art from the viewpoint of the architect: Confusing the question of art"<sup>3</sup>. In the last edition of *Skulptur Project* in Munster, the artist modified the terrace of the university building, transforming it into a bar. He worked with two simple elements: decoration and lights. The terrace was radiated with lights from inside the building, and a red rubber floor was installed. The perception of the place was completely new and suggested a different type of use of the space. By night it becomes a bar, a meeting point, a DJ set, storage. By day, the installed permanent concrete bench was used as a table. Rehberger's artistic strategy is connected with the idea of transforming instead of installing. The artist uses the preexisting elements as tools, and through the manipulation of those, creates innovation. The second relevant aspect of this work is that public is not just a viewer. They are the center of the work's functioning, as part of the creative process, because without them the work is just an abandoned space. The idea of plurality emerges here; the piece transforms space in a place by redesigning it in a way that introduces a public use.

Through the crossing of art's disciplinary borders towards other disciplines, as such design, the differences of specific approaches emerge. In 2002, the artist was invited for an exhibition in Africa. He drew five models of classical modernist chairs and sent them to the Cameron craftsmen for realizations. The drawings didn't have any specifications about the construction's details, such as measurements, colors or sizes. The interpretation of this design demonstrates the singularity of any culture. The differences in cultural acknowledgment emerged, expressed in construction techniques. This artwork, again, does not force a specific use, but liberates it.

## II b.

### Public art as a participatory process.

The project "Zingonia. Arte e integrazione culturale" took place in 2000 in a small town in the province of Bergamo. The presence of immigrant populations was perceived by dwellers as a conflict rather than a richness. The project was centered on the intercultural integration, trying to transform conflict into dialogue. The innovative factor of this project is the use of art as an open process working in the strata of differences. The artists – Liliana Moro, Luca Vitone, Stefano Arienti e Gennaro Castellano – invited all dwellers to the laboratories, as places for starting the collaborative process. Specifically, Stefano Arienti's work represents the whole population by investigating their names. All names were written down and stitched on pillows. As a result, an atlas appears that gave a place to anyone.

Liliana Moro ran laboratories with children with the most mixed populations. In a participative process, they built several house models that reflected the different desires and habits according with different cultural traditions.

This project is in line with the tradition of the so called 'new genre of public art', wherein new ideas of audience and a rethinking of a role of the artist, are considered. The 'new genre of public art' "designates the work of public artists who – as Lacy<sup>4</sup> puts it – 'adopt the public as their operative concept and quest'<sup>5</sup>. Instead of creating an art piece as an object to install, this approach of public art intends to create a participatory process that works inclusively. Speaking about the program "Culture in Action", which took place in Chicago in 1993, Mary Jane Jacob wrote "my aim was to posit public art in the role of a forum for dialogue and social action: a role more akin to the idea of the plaza than the sculpture in it. [...] Here we set up a process that was itself a part of art. Taking the notion of audience from that of spectator to participant, this program questioned the definition of social space, the mechanism of public art, the nature of artistic collaboration, and the relationship of art and social service"<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Jerome Sans, "Tobias Rehberger", in *Art Press*, n° 284, 2002, Paris, France.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome Sans, "Tobias Rehberger", in *Art Press*, n° 284, 2002, Paris, France.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Eviction: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1996. Cit. Pg. 280.

<sup>6</sup> Roberto Pinto, "Mary Jane Jakob" in *La città degli interventi. La Generazione delle immagini III*, Comune di Milano, 1997. Cit. Pg. 185.

### III

#### Conclusions.

What we can say about interdisciplinary art after this long analysis? Why we call this art approach 'interdisciplinary'?

The German artist uses art to investigate the built-up habits surrounding us, by penetrating their formal aspects. In the Rehberger works, interdisciplinary means a continuous shifting through different esthetic forms that, as we learn from the artist, are never 'passive' or culturally neutral. The crossing approach is a strategy to be mimetic toward the given space, object or context. The function of this art is to stimulate the process of 'seeing' familiar objects in another way. The designed forms are tools, and art is in the intentions.

In Zingonia the interdisciplinary possibility does not come by mixing art practices with others, but by promoting inclusivity as a result of transforming art practices into a process.

These recent public art works inscribe interdisciplinary possibilities as a type of dialogue with others disciplines such as design and architecture, or the discovery of a new form of relation with the public, the participants. In both these art works 'interdisciplinary' means an attitude of the art piece. The interdisciplinary possibility rises from inside art practices, as an openness in language, a historical product, as a new trend in contemporary art practices. This possibility inside the language of contemporary art makes it possible, for instance, the recent alliance with other disciplines around the urban field. As the recent public art experiences seem to demonstrate, public art is not public because it is outdoor, in front of the public or installed in the built city, but because the progressive conquest inside recent contemporary art practices made this dialogue possible.